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A STANDARD OF SPOKEN ENGLISH

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS

“WHAT is it that constitutes and makes man what he is?” Huxley asked in his discussion of *Man's Place in Nature*. “What is it but his power of language,—that language giving him the means of recording his experience, making every generation somewhat wiser than its predecessor, more in accordance with the established order of the universe?” Animals may have their simpler methods of conveying information and of communicating emotion, but man alone has developed the faculty of articulate speech which preceded and made possible the development of writing and of printing.

In these days when the printing press is omnipresent, it seems to many to be omnipotent; and they are often inclined to consider the spoken word less useful and less important than the written. Yet this is a mistaken view, for speech not only came into being before writing, it is even now many times more abundant. Most of the business of life is still transacted by word of mouth. The telephone is daily gaining on its rivals, the telegraph and the post-office; and now the typewriter is becoming subservient to the dictaphone. Even in literature, although history has long ceased to be an oral art akin to oratory, poetry does not come into its own until it is said or sung, making its ultimate appeal to the ear; and the drama is incomplete and comparatively inert until the give-and-take of its dialogue is endowed with life by the voice of the actor.

“The spoken word is first in order and in dignity, since the written word is only its image, as the other is the image of the thought itself,” so asserted Vaugelas, the regulator of usage in France nearly three centuries ago. And Socrates more than twenty centuries earlier used the same figure,

insisting that writing is the mere image or phantom of the living and animated word. The Greek philosopher asserted the abiding superiority of the spoken word over the written, since the latter—as Butcher summarized the objections—“has no power of adaptation; it speaks in one voice to all; it cannot answer questions, correct misunderstandings or supplement its own omissions.” Here the inventor of the Socratic method is a little too emphatic, in so far at least as he may seem to suggest an inferiority of writing to speaking so complete as to render any record useless. Although Socrates chose to express himself solely in speech, it is by the pages of Plato that his weighty utterances have been preserved for our profit.

There is no need now to dispute over the utility of the rival methods of human communication; each has its own opportunity. Writing is the more durable, but speaking is the more individual, since we write for others, more often than not, whereas we speak rather for ourselves, in response to an uncontrollable need. Thus it is that there is likely to be a wider divergence in the speech of one man from that of another than there is in their respective writings. If a highlander of Scotland and a mountaineer of Georgia were to meet, they would find in their several pronunciations and intonations a higher barrier to the interchange of information than they would discover if they were communicating with one another only by letter. The well-educated New Yorker and the well-educated Londoner when they take pen in hand are distinguishable by only a few localisms of vocabulary and usage; yet when they converse face to face their respective domiciles are likely to become instantly discoverable.

In his illuminating discussion of the many misguided efforts of dictionary-makers to declare an indisputable standard of English pronunciation, Lounsbury quoted Hawthorne as declaring that the pronunciation of *been* is an unfailing test of the nativity of a speaker, the Briton rhyming it to *seen* and the American to *sin*. Lounsbury also cited A. J. Ellis as preferring, for the test, *trait*, which we on this side of the Atlantic have frankly Anglicized, rhyming it to *straight*, whereas our kin across the sea have chosen to preserve the original French sound, rhyming it to *stray*. Lounsbury himself suggested that *schedule* is better fitted to serve as a shibboleth between the two greater divisions of the Eng-

lish-speaking peoples, since it is almost the universal custom of Americans to say *skedule* and of the British to say *shedule*. Other observers might readily find other words in which British usage and American do not agree, although there is not the rigid uniformity on either side of the Western Ocean that Hawthorne and Ellis asserted.

It has often been urged as an argument against all effort to regularize our chaotic orthography, and to encourage our spelling to conform a little less clumsily to our pronunciation, that any attempt in this direction is but an idle dream, since there is now no universally accepted pronunciation to which a simpler and more logical orthography could adjust itself naturally. There is no need to deny that this is a plausible objection; yet it will not withstand examination. True it is that there is nowhere to be found an inexpugnable authority having power to declare absolutely a final standard of pronunciation; and true it is also that there are many divergencies of utterance—national, sectional, local and individual; yet this diversity is far less than might be supposed. A large part of it is unconscious and would be denied indignantly by a majority of those who are guilty of it. Men whose pronunciation may be slovenly to the very verge of illiteracy are often unaware of their linguistic delinquencies; and many of them would be greatly shocked if they could hear with their own ears an exact reproduction of their habitual utterances. The majority of us recognize that there is a normal pronunciation, and we fondly believe that we conform to it. Indeed, when we speak in public, we generally make a strenuous effort to eliminate our personal peculiarities and to attain to the standard that we accept.

Now, if there is no authority to declare this standard, what is the normal pronunciation which we all more or less recognize and to which we seek to conform? How can there be any ideal uniformity of pronunciation between the British and the Americans? How could it exist in the United States when we can all of us distinguish at once the New Englander from the New Yorker, the man from the Middle West from the man from the Central South? And how could any such thing exist in Great Britain when everybody is aware of the very marked differences of speech between the Scotsman and the Yorkshireman, the Irishman and the Welshman, the cockney costermonger and the Oxford don? And then there are also the outlying possessions of the British Empire:

there is Australia, with its habits of speech modified by a climate very different from that which affects the utterances of the inhabitants of Canada. When we consider all these factors of the problem we are tempted to echo the remark of Old Bill Allen of Ohio not long after the Civil War, when he declared that the resumption of specie payments "is a damned barren ideality!"

And yet we may take heart when we remember that only a few years later specie payments were resumed, and without any great difficulty. We may find encouragement also in the fact that the condition of English pronunciation is scarcely worse than that of French or German, Italian or Spanish.

In fact, when we inquire more closely we discover that the situation in Spanish is not unlike that in English, since Spanish also is spoken by millions who no longer dwell in the land where the language came to its maturity; and yet the Spaniards have succeeded in establishing a standard of pronunciation and in adopting a spelling which is substantially phonetic. In one of his addresses as president of the Simplified Spelling Board, Professor Grandgent reminded his hearers that "Spanish is, like English, a world-language, and its vast territory contains many varieties of current usage." Then he asked:

Upon what type is the spelling based? According to history, ancient tradition and present sentiment, the official speech of Spain and her offshoots is Castilian; and a sort of purified Castilian—more consistent and conservative than that which is now heard in the streets of Madrid—is the kind of Spanish represented by the common orthography and regarded as a more or less remote ideal by the several Spanish provinces and nations. It must be confessed that in some of the countries of South America and even in Iberian Andalusia . . . the ideal is so remote as to be in danger of vanishing from the general consciousness. . . . But as long as the standard pronunciation is even vaguely present in the mind of a speaker, the orthography may, for that speaker, be called phonetic, though his practise depart never so far from the ideal.

Just as Castilian is accepted as the standard of Spanish, so Tuscan is accepted as the standard of Italian,—a language in which the orthography is also almost completely phonetic. No Italian child and no Spanish child is ever tortured by unremunerative toiling over a spelling-book. Yet the divergencies of the local dialects in various parts of Italy

from the Tuscan which is recognized as the ideal pronunciation are wider and more numerous than the corresponding divergencies in English. In the United States and in the British Empire education is more widespread than in Italy or Spain or Spanish America; and wherever the school-master is abroad there is an incessant pressure upon plastic youth to conform to the standard. Even if this conformity remains pitifully incomplete, at least there has been implanted a definite recognition of the existence of a norm and also an abiding respect for it.

As education is more thorough in France and in Germany than it is in Italy or in Spain, there has been a more striking success in imposing upon the French and the Germans a regard for the more or less remote ideal. In France, this ideal is found in the pronunciation of Paris,—although there are those who are wont to contend for the superior purity of the speech of Tours. Of course, this ideal is not the casual and careless utterance of the average Parisian; it is that religiously conserved on the stage of the *Théâtre Français*. Years ago a highly cultivated teacher of French residing in New York told me that he felt it his duty to spend at least every other summer in assiduous attendance on the performances of the *Comédie-Française* that he might recover the felicities of accent for which his ear was likely to be blunted by too constant association with his American pupils, from whom he was in danger of acquiring perversities of pronunciation which demanded periodical eradication.

France has adopted as its standard an idealization of the speech of Paris, just as Spain has accepted an idealization of the speech of Madrid. But Germany has no capital; Berlin may assert itself, but Dresden and Munich refuse to admit the supremacy of the Prussian metropolis; and a plea is often heard in behalf of Hanover as a city possessing a superior purity of speech,—a plea akin to that advanced for Tours. In the long centuries when Germany was only a geographical expression, it could not possess a capital with the centralizing attraction of Paris and Madrid; and even since the creation of the German Empire, the other large cities are a little inclined to deride Berlin as an upstart, as an overgrown village; owing its unexpected expansion to a political accident.

The necessity for a standard of pronunciation was keenly

felt in Germany, even if it could not be attained by the idealization of any local speech; and the problem of creating it was solved with Teutonic thoroughness. The exciting cause of the action finally taken was the disastrous effect of a heterogeny of local divergencies of pronunciation observable in the performances of the classics of the German drama, even when these were given by the carefully chosen and conscientiously trained companies of the court theaters. The Germans take the stage seriously, to their honor be it said; and the advantage of adopting a unified pronunciation for the use of actors at least was obvious to all lovers of the drama, who were continually in danger of having their attention distracted from the poetry of Schiller by jarring usages, often justified by irreconcilable traditions.

Professor Grandgent has kindly supplied me with an account of the steps taken to establish a standard German for the stage. In 1896 it was proposed to appoint a commission consisting of actors, managers and linguistic scholars; and the suggestion was approved in the following year by the General Superintendent of Royal Plays in Berlin, Graf von Hochberg, and by the German Philological Association. A committee of eleven was constituted in 1898, five professors representing the experts in language and six other members representing the actors and managers, chosen by the *Deutscher Bühnenverein*. Its recommendations were cordially received. As a result of this application of the methods of scientific efficiency to a linguistic difficulty, there is now an authoritative *Bühnenaussprache*, a German equivalent of the French pronunciation piously preserved by the Comédie-Française.

“It is universal suffrage which rules a language,” so Sainte-Beuve reminded us; “and no dictator has any authority.” Yet a majority of those interested may be quite willing to abide by the decisions of a dictator-committee composed of disinterested experts; and there might be profit for us who have English for our mother-tongue if we were to follow this German example and to constitute an American-British commission of actors and linguistic experts to suggest a preference in all those cases where the pronunciation is in dispute. It must be noted, however, that the need for an artificially agreed upon uniformity is not so obvious among the English-speaking peoples as it was in the German-speaking countries. For reasons partly historical and

partly literary—the early emergence of London as the capital and Chaucer's choice of its court-dialect—we had a consciousness of a normal grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation centuries before this was possible in Germany, which was for generations fragmentary and politically centrifugal, lacking until very late the cohesive form of a vital literature.

Even now the condition of spoken English is more satisfactory than that of spoken German, in spite of the recent establishment of the *Deutscher Bühnenaussprache*. It is true that Mr. Robert Bridges, poet-laureate, has recently held up his hands in holy horror at the vulgarian atrocities, the distortions and dislocations recorded by the British phoneticians; and it is true also that Mr. Henry James, in one of his flying visits to his native land, was so profoundly shocked by the slovenly utterances which fell upon his refined ear that he “loosed the fateful lightning of his wrath.” Nevertheless the assertion may be ventured that no competent observer could fail to find the speech of the average Briton or American of fair education less open to adverse criticism than the speech of the average German of equivalent instruction.

To say this is not to deny that there are dialectic and personal peculiarities audible both in Great Britain and the United States. The New Yorkers are as prompt to detect what we call the “British accent” as the Londoners are to recognize what they term the “American twang.” Yet there are not a few speakers of our tongue, born on one side of the Atlantic or the other, who are almost altogether free from localisms of intonation and pronunciation. The tongue they speak is English at its best—not British and not American. I recall that I first noticed this a third of a century ago, when I attended the dinner given in London to Henry Irving on the eve of his first visit to the United States in 1883. Lord Coleridge presided, and Lowell made one of the happiest of his addresses,—and while either of them was speaking the ears of the listeners were delighted by an English exquisite in its choice of words and delicately harmonious in its intonations. What Lord Coleridge and Lowell spoke was English pure and simple, not betraying itself as either British or American.

Of course, spoken English of this ultimate excellence is not common,—any more than the spoken French of Coquelin

or the spoken German of Barnay; it could not but be rare, and therefore the more precious. Probably because my opportunities have been more frequent in the United States than in Great Britain I should include more Americans than Britons on the list of those who have achieved it. I should enroll the name of President Eliot and not that of President McCosh. I should include John Hay and George William Curtis and not Matthew Arnold (who slighted his terminal *g's*) or Andrew Lang (whose early lowland Scotch was overlaid by later linguistic habits acquired in Oxford). I should leave off Henry Irving, as having been too individual, and I should put on the name of Edwin Booth. I should exclude Clara Morris and Lawrence Barrett and I should include Agnes Booth and Herman Vezin. From among the more prominent actors and actresses of today it would be impossible not to inscribe upon the roll Ellen Terry, Julia Marlowe, Forbes-Robertson, John Drew, Otis Skinner and George Arliss. But I must beg to be excused from the invidious task of singling out certain other contemporary actors and actresses of Great Britain and the United States who fail conspicuously to attain to this international standard.

Fortunately, the compassing of this lofty ideal is not strictly necessary in the presentation of the ordinary drama of the day dealing with a theme more or less local to one country or the other; it is not needed even when the original company transports the piece across the Atlantic. It is even possible that an occasional spectator in London might feel that he had not got his money's worth if he failed to recognize the expected American twang in one or more performers in an exclusively American cast of a characteristically American play; and in like manner the theatergoer of New York is quite as tolerant towards Britishisms of enunciation when he is beholding the representation of a British comedy by an exclusively British company as he is to the Britishisms of phrase which may besprinkle the dialogue of the piece itself,—locutions as unfamiliar to American ears as "Aren't I?" and "Directly I arrived." In fact, the localisms of phrase, like the corresponding localisms of pronunciation, might very well be defended by an ardent advocate of realism as helpful adjuncts to local color and as stricter approximations to the actual facts.

On the other hand, American and British audiences are

alike in desiring and even demanding a standardization of speech in the performance of plays of a larger import, wherein the actual fact yields to the essential truth. In any representation of the English classics, the tragedies of Shakespeare or the comedies of Sheridan, and in any performance of translations of foreign masterpieces, the psychological fantasies of Maeterlinck or the social dramas of Ibsen, we expect uniformity of pronunciation, and we are annoyed when our attention is distracted by inconsistencies in uttering *been* and *trait* and *schedule*, which reveal to us at once that the utterer is not a man of another time or another land, but provokingly British or American.

It is therefore a good augury for the future to discover that so conscientious and so competent an observer as Professor Grandgent takes a very hopeful view of the outlook:

Dramatic tours, carrying actors from end to end of the English-speaking world, have made the approved practises of each great section familiar to every other part; while transference of performers from company to company and from country to country has worked for the establishment of an international theatrical standard. In the best performances of serious drama it is now often impossible for a spectator to tell whether a given actor is British or American.

That is to say, these performers have succeeded in shedding whatever local peculiarities of pronunciation and of enunciation they may have originally possessed. No longer do they speak British-English or American-English; they speak English pure and simple, as did Lord Coleridge and Lowell. And this should be an ideal for all of us, whether native to these United States or to any part of the British Empire.

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